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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 002843

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTION # 46: ESTRELLA, WOULD-BE STAR

[11](#). (SBU) This is cable # 46 in our series on the Dominican presidential election:

ESTRELLA, WOULD-BE STAR

Heading for third place

In the last week before the presidential election, Reformista candidate Eduardo Estrella continues to work the campaign trail with the remaining PRSC faithful. Estrella is smart, has a good resume, and photographs well, but as a public speaker lacks animation, mumbles and rarely rallies the crowd. The deep division of his party and his reluctance to promise or rant reinforce long-held expectations that on May 16 he will place third in a three-horse race.

Estrella will become a factor if there is a second round - that is, if no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the votes on May 16. He insists he will place second and run against Fernandez until June 30. It is more likely that he will face the unappealing decision whether or not to throw his support behind Mejia or Fernandez. That choice will be hard: he will have to decide whether to follow treachery into the PLD, to endorse a PRD that he has scorned, or to sit out the contest. In the event of a second round, Mejia will be looking to cut a deal with him -- exactly the sort of politics that Estrella has rebuffed. Nonetheless, many of our contacts believe he will cast his lot with Mejia.

Estrella's party was plagued from the outset with an internal squabble over rival candidate Jacinto Peynado, VP to the late PRSC strongman Balaguer, PRSC presidential candidate in 2000 and probably the most popular Reformista leader after Balaguer's death in 2002. Peynado battled for his party's endorsement and continued to fight for it after a PRSC primary in 2003 went in favor of Estrella. Peynado, gravely ill in Miami over most of the last year, gave up his quest for the Palace and said he would not endorse any candidate. In February, old-school PRSC leaders Carlos Morales Troncoso, Donald Reid Cabral and Leonardo Matos Berrido publicly backed Fernandez; in March Peynado changed his mind and followed suit. The PRSC seniors have told emboffs that Fernandez has promised "several secretariats" and some "municipal jobs" to the former Reformistas.

Estrella, talented but self-effacing, had fame thrust upon him when the inner circle from Balaguer's former administration looked for a candidate younger, cleaner, healthier and more electable than Peynado. At lunch with Embassy officers late last year, Estrella made small talk and left the big picture to his advisors, former Foreign Minister Victor Gomez Berges and PRSC political secretary Johnny Jones. Estrella is sensitive and almost painfully shy (even his secretary said so in a phone call with EcoPol counselor). This quality may appeal to Reformistas, with their reverent memories of the enigmatic, withdrawn Balaguer who cunningly ruled the country for 22 years and left his personal stamp on Dominican politics.

Estrella's acceptance of the nomination and his determined campaigning show self-mastery and intellectual courage. He has a reputation for honesty and good management, and we tend to believe his assertion that "millions and millions of pesos went through my hands and not a single peso went into my pocket." Estrella's April 14 comments to the American Chamber of Commerce condemning corruption carried weight (see text on our SIPRNET site). Estrella's billboards show him against a backdrop of PRSC red with a tight-lipped, reproachful expression and admonitory pointed finger over the slogan, "The country cannot put up with this any more!" ("El pais no aguanta mas!") To his disadvantage, most Dominican voters are focused on their symptoms of economic distress rather than on domestic mismanagement or corruption. Many pay lip service to the

principles of good governance, but wink at or engage in a partisan scramble for government favors and jobs.

Engineer to politician - a brief bio

Eduardo Estrella Sathala is from the second largest city in the Dominican Republic, Santiago, known as a breeding ground for politicians. He comes from a prominent family that protected opponents of Rafael Trujillo's 1930-61 dictatorship. His father and grandfather were senior military officers, and an uncle was among the conspirators who assassinated Trujillo -- a group now revered as national heroes.

Estrella graduated from the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) with a civil engineering degree, and PRSC President Balaguer appointed him second secretary at the Dominican Embassy in Mexico City. Estrella returned to the Santiago area and served as president of the Northern Regional Dominican School of Engineers, Architects and Surveyors. Elected as Santiago's senator in 1986, he was appointed by Balaguer as Under Secretary for Public Works and Communications and in 1991 advanced to Secretary of State for Public Works and Communications, a post he held until 1994. Estrella returned to his elected position in the Senate from 1994-1998.

Estrella was born on June 5, 1953. He is married to Arelis Cruz de Estrella and they have three children.

12. (U) Drafted by Angela Kerwin, Michael Meigs.

13. (SBU) This report and others in the series are available on the classified SIPRNET at <http://www.state.sgov.p/wha/santodomingo/> along with extensive other material.
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